"He will bring misery to us, with his talk of a humble God. Where does it show in the Bible a humble God? Unh?" Suresh Sastri just happened to have a Bible in his hand as he asked this question to the group of men collected in his store. He raised the Bible and thumped it with the flat of his palm. "No! God commands our praise through His greatness, and misfortune will fall upon our heads if we allow this pup to turn us against glorifying Him!"

"You do not understand this preacher, I think," Mudaliyappa Jalal said, trying hard not to appear insolent even though he was the youngest man there, speaking to Suresh Sastri, the wealthiest, most influential man in Corray. Mudaliyappa looked at his feet, afraid to make eye contact, and continued. "He is not saying God is humble, but certainly Jesus taught us –"

"Bah!" Suresh Sastri thumped the Bible again. "You know nothing! You either love God, or you love this useless man who comes to us from Denmark where spend their days drunk and fat, all of them living in sin!" For a moment it looked as if Suresh Sastri was going to throw the Bible at Mudaliyappa, but the merchant restrained himself. Instead, he pointed an accusatory finger at the younger man and asked, "Tell me, wasn't it you who took your father's money to Ahmadnagar? And didn't you stay with your friend, the Mahometan? And how did you find his Mosque? Unh? Was it as 'gaudy' as our church? Was it as 'ostentatious'? Tell me, was it so decorated with jewels and gold as to be an 'insult to God'? No, I'm sure it wasn't. I'm sure it was nothing more than a tent and a rug. Is that what you want our church to be? We can build an altar of dung, root around in the dirt like dogs. Is that what you want? It must be so, because you do not have a coin left of your father's money. Nothing left to glorify God!"

Suresh Sastri stood over Mudaliyappa. He dropped his voice and offered one last condemnation. "Do you know what I think? I think you are ashamed to be Christian."

Mudaliyappa bowed his head low and did not say another word.

After the meeting, Mudaliyappa hurried away from Suresh Sastri's store and went swiftly to Bartholomaeus Pluetschau's mission. He was furious at how he had been treated by the merchant, but knew he was in no position to defend himself. He had fallen out-of-favor with his own family, yes, because of the money he had lost, and now he didn't have any friends left in the village. Except for the kind missionary who assured Mudaliyappa that God didn't count coin in heaven. Indeed, the Dutchman had told him that it was a blessing to lose so much because you cannot appreciate what you will gain in heaven until you lose everything you have on earth.

This seemed wise to Mudaliyappa. So, what if his father had to sell land to settle a debt? An acre in heaven is worth more than a hundred on earth! So, what if his mother had to sell jewelry to pay the merchants? Gold means so little next to the radiance of God! And so, what if his sister could not get married because Mudaliyappa had lost the dowry? She will be better off when she is called to heaven and cleaved to the side of Jesus. What man in this village could offer her such bliss! And, finally, so what if the Jalal family had to renege on their pledge to help finance the building of the new church? God does not judge by the balance of Suresh Sastri's crooked scales!

At last, Mudaliyappa came upon the mud-brick front of Bartholomaeus Pluetschau's mission. There were no silver framed windows or gold encrusted doors. No marble pillars or tiled archways. No massive steeple to block the sun or jeweled crucifix to mock the poor. Only a canvas curtain for the door and a roof made of palm leaves. Truly, a church where Jesus would feel welcome.

Out of habit, Mudaliyappa tugged at the canvas to gain entry. Surprisingly, it didn't open. Something held it at the bottom, like it was weighed down. Mudaliyappa stepped back and scratched his head. "Brother Pluetschau?" he called, finding the edge of the curtain and pulling it hard, creating an opening to peer through. "Hello? Namaste?" he squeezed his face between the curtain and the edge of the door.

All the windows were similarly covered with dusty beige canvas, and it took a moment for Mudaliyappa's eyes to adjust to the filtered light inside the mission. He saw movement around the altar, and heard voices whispering, but couldn't tell how many people were there.

Mudaliyappa forced the curtain more and popped his shoulder through the opening. He brought a knee up and wedged it into the slit as well. He grunted and twisted, trying to force enough space to enter. Standing on one leg, Mudaliyappa lost balance and pitched forward. He clutched at the curtain to break his fall. It ripped away from the doorframe and Mudaliyappa fell into the church, barking his shin on the stone bench that had been pushed against the door to hold the curtain in place.

Mudaliyappa cried out as he struggled with the swath of canvas that had twisted around his body. It gave him fits as he tried to stand, always catching a foot and sending him back to his battered knees. "Chey!" Mudaliyappa yelled in frustration.

"Brother Mudaliyappa!" Pluetschau exclaimed, hurrying down the center aisle, "What are you doing here? There is no mass today." The missionary helped Mudaliyappa to his feet, freeing him from the torn canvas.

"I have come to warn you, brother," Mudaliyappa said, rubbing his leg, "They are talking about casting you out. Even putting you in prison!"

Bartholomaeus Pluetschau clasped his hands together and nodded. "Thank you, brother, for telling me so. Now, if you'll please excuse me…." Pluetschau gently touched Mudaliyappa's shoulder and pointed him towards the door.

Mudaliyappa noticed that the missionary's normal appearance of propriety was in disarray. He wasn't wearing a wig, and his natural blond hair fell over his forehead where it stuck in moist clumps. His shirt was soaked through with sweat and only the first two buttons were fastened. His trousers appeared to have been put on sideways, and he wore one sandal. He kept looking back towards the altar, biting his lip and breathing through his nose.

"What's wrong?" Mudaliyappa insisted, rising to his toes to peer over Pluetschau's shoulder. "Is somebody here?" Mudaliyappa saw the white muslin cloth that covered the altar move and heard a faint, musical jangling sound.

"No!" Pluetschau turned Mudaliyappa around and gave him a little push.

Mudaliyappa tried to turn back and tripped over the bench again, this time landing hard on his ass. "Chey! Puthichi!" he cried.

"Brother Mudaliyappa!" Pluetschau scolded. "Such language in God's house! You must go now and repent for offending God's ear. Go!"

Pluetschau hustled Mudaliyappa through the door and immediately started pinning the canvas back to its fasteners. Mudaliyappa rubbed his backside and listened as the missionary lifted the heavy stone bench to hold down the curtain. Pluetschau took two more benches, groaning with exertion as he dragged them across the floor and flipped them lengthwise to completely block the door behind the curtain.

Mudaliyappa touched the canvas and felt the stone behind it. “Brother Pluetschau?” He said, “What is wrong? Who is in there with you?”

“Godverdomme!” came the reply. “No one is with me, I am alone. Praying. Now go! Go you sinner! Go and repent!” With that, Mudaliyappa heard the thumping of Pluetschau’s footsteps walking away.

Mudaliyappa threw his hands in the air and turned to leave. He hesitated for a moment, wondering if he shouldn’t at least tell Brother Pluetschau about the meeting at Suresh Sastri’s market – how the men agreed to compose a letter accusing him of heresy. If Pluetschau wasn’t careful, faced with such charges, prison could become the least of his worries.

As Mudaliyappa stood at the door, wondering what to do, he heard noises coming from inside the mission. The sound of a girl laughing, followed by the unmistakable tone of Brother Pluetschau’s voice – harsh and guttural like all Dutchmen, but spoken softly so Mudaliyappa couldn’t make out any words.

Mudaliyappa bent low and walked around the corner of the mission, careful not to brush against the windows. The sounds grew louder as he approached the side where the altar stood. There were no words now, no laughter, just heavy breathing and moans of passion. Passion and the unmistakable jangle of a woman’s padaswaram, an ankle bracelet, banging against bone as her leg bounced rhythmically on top of the altar in Brother Pluetschau’s humble mission.

Bartholomaeus Pluetschau stood in the middle of the street, arms raised to heaven, as an early monsoon rain lashed against him. Silver braids of water hurled unrelentingly from the sky, tearing at his clothes, boiling the mud at his feet. He was shouting the Lord’s Prayer at the top of his lungs. He spat rainwater from his mouth after every breath.

A crowd of villagers had gathered in the market to watch the strange Dutchman as he raged against the elements with nothing but a thin, muslin robe on his shoulders and the word of God on his tongue. Suresh Sastri stood under his store’s awning, just out of the storm’s reach, and threw coconuts at the missionary. The rain and wind drove the heavy seeds to the ground well short of their intended target, but that didn’t stop Suresh from continuing the barrage, yelling “get out of my village, you devil!” with every throw.

Brother Pluetschau ignored Suresh and continued praying. He dropped to his knees, sinking into the river of mud that had become the main street. He bowed his head, hands clasped in front of his chest. Suresh laughed and pointed at him. “See the holy man!” he yelled, “Wallowing in filth! *Bathing* in it! He thinks he is glorifying God? He is covered in chey!” Suresh could barely contain himself now, the monsoon being the only thing keeping him from taking to the street and physically assaulting the missionary. “Heretic heretic!” he chanted, spittle flying from his lips into the wall of rainwater. “Heretic!”

Brother Pluetschau rose to his feet. His robe was drenched and heavy with mud. It clung to his body like a second skin, his naked form appearing large and strong under the stained cloth. He raised his chin but kept his eyes closed against the rain. “Brothers and Sisters!” he shouted with his deep, Germanic voice. “I have been accused of heresy! They have taken away my mission! And now they want to send me back to Denmark, hide me away in a monetary!”

“You go to hell!” Suresh offered, but Pluetschau didn’t acknowledge the interruption.

“I stand before you Christians with nothing but my voice,” Pluetschau continued, “which can do no more than speak of God. You have heard me talk of Jesus and the disciples. I have translated for you the letters of Saint Thomas. Was it a waste of breath? Are your ears closed to all but the sound of gold coins filling the church coffer?”

Suresh shook with rage. He stepped into his store and grabbed the machete he used to cut sugarcane. “Liar!” Suresh shouted, waving the blade over his head. “I will send you to the devil!”

As Suresh stood ranting in the shelter of his doorway, Mudaliyappa stepped gently around him and went out into the storm. He walked slowly, cautiously across the street, which was rapidly becoming a river, the water reaching mid-calf. Mudaliyappa stood next to Brother Pluetschau and held out his hand. The Dutchman grabbed both Mudaliyappa’s hands, clenching them so hard that Mudaliyappa wondered if he was being punished for transgressing upon the preacher’s impromptu sermon. But when Mudaliyappa locked eyes with the missionary, he saw no anger there, only the intensity of passion, commitment, and gratitude.

Others began leaving their places of shelter to join Brother Pluetschau and Mudaliyappa in the cleansing rain. Soon a respectable sized crowd had gathered around the missionary, all of them holding hands, heads bowed, buckets of water rolling over the backs of their necks. A petite girl made her way through the throng of people surrounding Brother Pluetschau. She wore the finest clothes – a sari with highlights of real gold and stunning patterns of jewels sewn into the silk; a dress so expensive, it cost more than most of the villagers would earn in their lifetimes – irreparably damaged now by the rain and mud. The delicate features and flawless skin of her face told of a privileged life away from the toils of farm work. She was easily the most beautiful creature in the village. She took her place next to Brother Pluetschau. He let go of Mudaliyappa’s hands to grab hold of hers.

Mudaliyappa stepped back and looked at the girl. The torrential rain had plastered her long, black hair to her body and it stuck like seaweed to the sides of her face, down her back, with a few thick, ropey strands of it looped over her shoulders, falling to the sides of her youthful breasts. Mudaliyappa stood close enough that he could see everything through her drenched clothes. The tips of her breasts were dark and hard, rising and falling with each impassioned breath. The silk of her sari clung to her girlish belly, showing just a hint of a bulge, then rounded out over her hips and backside. Mudaliyappa quickly looked away from the shadow between her legs and cast his eyes downward. Her feet were consumed by mud, but Mudaliyappa’s gaze fell upon the expensive gold padaswaram clasped around her left ankle. The symbolic trinkets attached to the chain floated in the water, spinning around like oddly shaped, dainty little fish.

From the doorway of his store, Suresh Sastri watched his daughter cut a path through the crowd so she could hold hands with the evil heretic. He slapped the machete blade against his palm repeatedly. He lost sight of her as the crowd closed in, and the last image Suresh had of his daughter was that of

a pathetic beggar. Her hair – the same hair his wife spent hours preparing with lotions and brushes – being undone and filthy, and her clothes – the same clothes that cost him a fortune – stained with water and mud. But an even greater humiliation than watching his daughter swallowed by filth was seeing the look of happiness on her face as she took her place beside the big, European holy man. The relentless curtain of rain was enough to block the sun, but it did nothing to dim the brilliance of her smile when Pluetschau gripped her hands. Suresh would have raced out to strike her then, if not for fear of ruining his own fine suit of clothes.

The crowd began saying the Lord's prayer. Suresh Sastri continued slapping the machete against his hand. He did not feel pain when the blade scrapped flesh from his fingers. Soon his palm was filled with blood and every thwap of the blade sent red droplets upon the pristine white cuff of his korta.

Suresh Sastri stacked another pile of coins. That made ten stacks of gold, each about one foot high, arranged in a circular pattern on his desk. He bowed his head and looked over the tops of the stacks, eyeballing Mudaliyappa who sat across the desk from him. Mudaliyappa flashed a weak smile then his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed. Suresh swept his arm violently through the stacks, filling the air with spinning circles of gold. Mudaliyappa covered his head.

"It means nothing!" Suresh roared, pushing himself up from his chair. He towered over Mudaliyappa, hands clenched into fists, knuckles turning white. "Coins, gold, money – Unh! What good is it? All the money in the world and still I cannot show my face in this village because of your preacher." Suresh spat the last word like he was purging filth from his mouth.

"He does not belong to me." Mudaliyappa peeked from behind his hands. "Brother Pluetschau belongs to all of us."

Suresh flinched. His shoulder twitched with an almost uncontrollable urge to lash out at the boy. Somehow, he managed to restrain himself, breathing heavy as he returned to his chair.

"You know where he is hiding, yes? In the backwater somewhere, hiding like a snake? You could take me to him?" Suresh asked.

Mudaliyappa smiled humbly and bowed his head. "Brother Pluetschau is not hiding. He is there for all who seek God. And by God's grace he is invisible only to those who wish evil upon him."

The room grew quite save for the sound of Suresh's teeth grinding in rage.

Finally, Suresh relaxed his jaws enough to speak; "You go to him," he said slowly and clearly, enunciating every word as if speaking to a child. "You tell him I will buy my daughter back."

"Oh, he would not –"

Suresh slammed his fists onto the desktop. Gold coins jumped like fleas.

"You tell him I will pay whatever! Whatever he asks."

Mudaliyappa swallowed again, lowered his head, and pushed away from the desk. He stood up, turned around, and felt the heat of Suresh Sastri's glare on his back as he walked out of the office.

Suresh walked among the marble stones, nodding with satisfaction as he inspected them. Their coloring was incredible, like milk that had been made solid by alchemy. They were warm to the touch from sitting in the morning sun. Suresh ran his hands over the tops, feeling the chips and scratches caused by the rough sea voyage from Italy. He could see in his mind how these stones would look once carved into a sculptured arch for his church. Glorious.

Mudaliyappa trailed two steps behind the merchant, hands clamped nervously at his belly, afraid to touch anything. He didn't want to risk upsetting Suresh Sastri by marking the precious stones with his dirty hands.

"Do you see?" Suresh turned around with his arms held high, taking in the fifty slabs, over a ton of Italian marble. "All for the glory of God."

Mudaliyappa held his tongue, but his mind questioned the use of dead stone to honor a living God.

Suresh noticed the look on Mudaliyappa's face and sneered at him. "Unh. What do you know about it? You have fallen under the spell of that wizard. You would be better off as a Hindu, sniffing around for gods like dogs, or even a satanic Musselman, instead of corrupting the true faith with your lies.

"Tell me Bartholomaeus Pluetschau's answer then get out of my sight," Suresh concluded with a sigh.

"Brother Pluetschau will take no money for your daughter," Mudaliyappa muttered softly, afraid of the old man's wrath.

Suresh nodded. He looked at Mudaliyappa who just stood there, chin pushed all the way down to his chest.

"Well? What else?" Suresh demanded.

"Your daughter?"

"Yes, god-damn it, what else?"

"She is going to have a child."

Suresh turned his back on Mudaliyappa. He stood still for a moment, then started walking away, down the aisles created by the marble stones, touching them, running his fingers over the imperfect surfaces.

Mudaliyappa straightened his back and breathed a sigh of relief. He had expected to be cursed at, if not beaten, for delivering this news. But Suresh hadn't even raised his voice today. Perhaps the spirit of God was working in the old merchant, Mudaliyappa thought. Yes, that must be it; the Holy Ghost was softening his heart.

It started raining in late October – a violent and chilly monsoon well past the normal season for such heavy rains. By mid-November, the rain was still falling and the village of Corray had been saturated to the point of bursting. Everything and everyone had become slick and sopping, miserable

and cold. The streets had been washed away, and the brick homes began sliding on their muddy foundations, bumping against each other as the current moved them ever closer towards the ocean.

From his floating mission in the backwaters, Brother Pluetschau had sermonized that the flood was a manifestation of God's anger. "They can exile me," he had roared, rainwater spraying from his lips, "but God will restore me to my flock. See how he knows I am preaching on a raft? See how he makes all roads water so I may travel to where I am needed? This is why I do not pray for the rain to stop. I pray more rain will fall! And I will float my raft into Corray, over the market where the merchant's horde their wealth, over the construction site where they are planning to build their new church, and yes, even over the marble slabs that they have brought to the village, foolishly thinking they can climb to heaven on precious stones."

Mudaliyappa thought about that sermon as he navigated his snake boat through the floodwaters that had overtaken the streets of Corray. The rain had reduced itself to a slight drizzle, so Mudaliyappa took it upon himself to boat through what was left of the village, searching for anything salvageable he could take back to Brother Pluetschau and his bride. Maybe even a gift for the baby, as it was due to arrive any day now. Mudaliyappa lazily paddled through the brown water, scanning the debris that floated by, contemplating ways he could help Bartholomaeus Pluetschau return to Corray so God would stop the rain.

If only he could talk to Suresh Sastri. A letter from Suresh recanting his accusations of heresy and impropriety would certainly bring Pluetschau back into the good graces of the church and they would once again allow him to run his mission in Corray. Then maybe the rain would stop.

Unfortunately, nobody had seen or heard from Suresh Sastri in the past five months. Shortly after Mudaliyappa had told him about his daughter's pregnancy, Suresh had stopped conducting business at the market, locked himself in his house, and would not accept visitors. Mudaliyappa steered towards an upside-down pot bobbing in the water. He lifted it, inspected the inside and found that, aside from some caked rice burned to the bottom, it was in good condition. He set it in the boat and started navigating towards Suresh Sastri's market. Perhaps, Mudaliyappa thought, if he offered to help Suresh protect his store from the flood, the merchant would agree to talk with him. It was worth trying.

As Mudaliyappa paddled down the street, he noticed the door to Suresh Sastri's market had broken off. No light came from inside the building, and it looked deserted. "Hello?" Mudaliyappa called out as he brought his boat close to the building. "Is there anybody inside?"

He noticed hundreds of jars of spices and foodstuffs floating in the water around the market. It appeared as if Suresh's entire inventory was being washed away.

Mudaliyappa stepped out of his boat and secured it against the wall of the building. He entered the market, wading through water that was as deep as his shins. There were no lamps lit and Mudaliyappa could only see the bulky forms of tables and shelves where the merchandise used to be displayed. He took a few more cautious steps into the room and tried to focus his eyes in the darkness. Something brushed against his leg and Mudaliyappa jerked his foot out of the water, momentarily frightened. He assured himself that it was probably just another errant bottle and started walking again.

A hard wind hit the building, and the walls groaned. Outside the rain started again, softly for a moment, then heavy black sheets of it began hammering the roof. Mudaliyappa looked back and saw the rain was as thick as a curtain covering the door. He took a deep breath and considered staying in the market for a while, at least until the storm passed over.

Moving mostly from memory, Mudaliyappa felt his way to the back wall where he knew there was a ladder leading to an elevated storeroom containing fabrics and dry goods. He hoped that the storeroom would be dry enough for him to rest there for a while.

Mudaliyappa found the first rung of the ladder and was about to hoist himself up when he heard a hissing sound. His blood froze, thinking *snake!* He stood perfectly still, daring only to move his head. It was impossible to see clearly in the darkness of the store. Without realizing it, Mudaliyappa had stopped breathing for a long time and, when he couldn't hold it anymore, he expelled air in a sobbing gasp.

Then he heard laughter behind him. A menacing and wicked sound, made by somebody who enjoyed Mudaliyappa's fear.

Mudaliyappa turned his head and saw a bulky shape approaching him from the other end of the aisle. "Hello?" Mudaliyappa squeaked. "Who's there?"

"Don't you recognize me?" The voice was low and powerful.

"I can't see you!" Mudaliyappa wailed. "Please, who is there?"

The mysterious figure reached and plucked an object from the wall. There was a spark, then a flame, and a lamp was lit.

The blaze illuminated Suresh Sastri's face.

Mudaliyappa felt a moment of relief until he noticed that Suresh had used some kind of bright dye to paint his face green. And he wore a ridiculous, billowing red suit. He held the lamp in one hand, and the length of rope in the other.

"Suresh?" Mudaliyappa asked. "What is wrong with you?"

Suresh shook his head and corrected him, "Yama."

Yama? Mudaliyappa recognized that name as one of the Hindu Gods. Had Suresh descended so far into madness that he would take the name of a Hindu God?

"Your store is floating away, Suresh." Mudaliyappa let go of the ladder and got both feet on the ground "Do you want me to help you gather up your bottles?"

Suresh laughed again and continued moving closer, his legs pushing steadily through the water. "I don't collect bottles, you fool."

Mudaliyappa did not like the way Suresh's eyes looked – wide open with whites showing clear around the irises. Mudaliyappa stepped back until he hit the wall. He had nowhere else to go.

“Your daughter is about to give birth, Suresh,” Mudaliyappa stammered. “Would you like me to take you to her? You could see the baby?”

Suresh smiled, white teeth glowing in the lamplight. “Yama,” Suresh chided, drawing the name slowly like he was talking to a child. “You should know me; I am in the Veda.”

The Veda. A Hindu text. Mudaliyappa shook his head and cried, “No, Suresh! You are a Christian! You are building a church!”

Suresh hung the lamp on a wall-hook and tied a knot in the rope, making a loop. “Suresh has become part of the Veda,” he said, pulling the rope tight with his teeth. “His story will be told.”

“But you are Suresh Sastri,” Mudaliyappa pleaded. “You own this market!”

“Suresh Sastri was a foolish man who allowed devils to guide him. They told him to open a market; so, he did. They told him to make money; so, he did. They told him to pray to a carpenter; so, he did.”

Mudaliyappa dipped his shoulder and prepared to run past Suresh, who had obviously gone totally insane. But Suresh saw the motion and clucked his tongue. He moved to block the aisle.

“Listen to his story. You can be the first to hear it, before it becomes part of the Veda,” Suresh pointed a finger at Mudaliyappa, motioning for him to stand still.

“One day Suresh started hearing the Veda in his head. The stories came from the air and filled his ears with sacred truths. At first it drove him mad because he was unaccustomed to hearing truths, having listened to nothing but lies for so long, but then he understood that he was blessed because it was the voice of Kalki, the rider, the tenth Avatar of Vishnu, reciting the Veda. And Suresh was allowed to hear the consecrated words because Kalki was growing in the womb of Suresh’s daughter, preparing to enter this world and bring about divine judgment.

“But Suresh’s daughter had been captured by one of the devils – a great demon with white hair and a forked tongue. This demon held her prisoner in the backwaters, hiding her away from her devoted father. Ah, but guided by Kalki’s voice, Suresh found his daughter just as she was going into labor. She lay on her back on a floating platform with midwives all around. And the great demon stood over her, shamelessly looking at her as she struggled with childbirth.

“Suresh knew that the demon was waiting to kill Kalki as soon as he entered this world. Suddenly the words of the Veda stopped filling his ears and Suresh heard a baby cry. He had to move fast! He raised his machete over his head and ran towards the platform, casting waves of water before him. The midwives fled in terror, but the white demon stood defiant. Suresh leapt onto the platform and with one mighty blow, he cleaved the demon’s skull, the blade of Suresh’s machete now wedged forever in the bone between those demonic eyes.

“Suresh knelt and picked up the screaming baby. He trembled as he pulled the afterbirth away, wiping the face so he could see Kalki in all his glory.

“But the face was white. And when Suresh forced the eyelids apart, he saw the eyes were blue. The baby looked at Suresh with blues eyes and the screams turned to laughter. The child was not Kalki, but a demonic mockery.

“Suresh tossed the abomination into the water and called for me, Yama, the God of Hell. I came and collected the demon, the child, and Suresh’s own daughter who would not repent even as I tied my rope around her neck.”

“God, no,” Mudaliyappa moaned. His vision blurred and he felt faint. He collapsed to his knees, splashing the water.

“You too, have mocked the Veda.” Suresh hovered above him. With one hand he held the lamp high and the other held the noose out front, so it cast a shadow across Mudaliyappa’s face. Suresh moved forward, water lapping around his legs.

“Will you repent?”

“Suresh….”

“Will you?”

“My God, my god….”

“No?”

“Suresh, please….”

“Yama. I am the God of the dead. The God of Truth.”

“…vishnu…”

Suresh stopped abruptly. He lowered the lamp, then let it fall from his hand. The blaze died with a hiss and a puff of steam as it hit the water. Cast into darkness, Mudaliyappa buried his head in his hands and sobbed.

When he finally took his hands away, Suresh was gone.

An elephant, a fish, a crescent moon, a swastika, a bird…. Mudaliyappa held the padaswaram in his hands and rotated through each gold trinket like they were prayer beads. He sat on top of one of Suresh Sastri’s precious marble slabs, now stained and grossly misused after the flood. The moon looked enormous in the cold December sky. Mudaliyappa closed his eyes and listened to the wind and the insects and the nocturnal birds.

The sounds of the Veda.

Mudaliyappa continued feeling the links of the padaswaram. He had found the ankle bracelet tangled in a patch of weeds a few days after the flood waters had receded and, although he always set out with the intention of placing it on her grave, every night he wound up walking away from the cemetery, finding himself in a lonely place, fondling the gold bracelet with his long fingers.

Mudaliyappa came to the link that was shaped like a crucifix. He rubbed it between his thumb and forefinger, tracing the outline of the cross. Then he pinched it, gradually increasing the force of his grip until he felt the thin strip of metal bend. *Just a little more pressure*, Mudaliyappa thought, *and it would break in two*.